

WE'RE **LOCAL** AND WE'RE **LISTENING**



From the determination of a transportation need to the planning and design of a project, and right on through construction, input from the public is a critical part of the project development and delivery process at the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Long gone are the days when lines drawn on a map were soon followed by production of blueprints and the arrival of earth moving equipment to begin changing the landscape.

Largely that change in focus began in the late 1960s when Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act. It requires that impacts to the natural and man-made environments be carefully evaluated and taken into consideration when planning transportation projects and that the public be involved in a collaborative decision-making process.

Although compliance with NEPA regulations is required on all projects that utilize federal funds, MoDOT's goal is to integrate the public in transportation decisions regardless of the project's funding source. MoDOT's Project Development Manual, which guides planners, designers and project managers through a prescribed process, details public-involvement expectations.

In part, it says: "It is important to remember that gaining public involvement through any means, including the formal public hear-

ing, is not just a base to be touched or a box to be checked in the project-development process. Public involvement allows MoDOT to gather real, valid input on transportation needs and to work with customers to refine solutions that meet those needs.

"This involvement is also important as we attempt to develop transportation projects within the context of the communities we serve. Early and continuous solicitation of public opinion will identify what customers expect from our improvements."

Over the years MoDOT's philosophy and approach to involving citizens in its work has shifted significantly. Gone are the days of a single, massive public hearing with limited interaction between department employees and citizens. Today the department works hard to get Missourians involved in planning and projects. And once the department and citizens come together, a new skill is used: listening.

Here are some examples of this change in philosophy from across the state.

PUBLIC INPUT SAVES MONEY, TIME, LIVES IN NORTHEAST DISTRICT

By Marisa Brown

Like any good business, MoDOT constantly evaluates efficiencies that will save money. After all, when the department implements an efficiency that affects the bottom line, it's saving public tax dollars.

For this construction season and next, MoDOT's Northeast District is saving an estimated \$3 million. How? A change in philosophy over the past few years has allowed MoDOT to ask the public for their input about closing roads for certain projects. Although most of these involve bridge replacements and repair, there are others that include adding turn lanes. Not surprisingly, MoDOT customers have been receptive to the idea of saving their money.

There are many reasons why MoDOT changed its philosophy, most of which surround the fact that the department is demonstrating a responsible use of taxpayer dollars. It is more efficient to close a road to replace a bridge than to build a temporary bypass. A temporary bypass for a bridge project is essentially a temporary bridge that will be torn out when the project is completed. Building a temporary route adds time to the project, and, in turn, adds dollars;



depending on the size of the bridge a bypass can cost up to half a million dollars. Most bridge replacements require the road to be closed for up to five months.

Money is saved on non-bridge projects as well. Not building an alternate route saves contractors time allowing them to work on the actual project. That reduces the time on construction and saves money. On these projects, typically it is safer for the motorists and the workers when there is little traffic to contend with.

Closing a road is no small thing and MoDOT does not take it lightly. Letters are sent out to local residents, emergency responders and schools asking for their input. Staff members personally visit with

people who have reservations about closing the road, and take all viewpoints into consideration.

If it wasn't for the understanding and input from the local residents, this program would not work. Some of the solutions have been as simple as waiting to start work on a bridge until after school has let out for the summer, which helps bus drivers and the schools.

It is estimated that with every three to four bypass routes MoDOT doesn't have to build it saves enough money to replace an additional new bridge. One project in Lewis County is saving more than \$1 million. Another in Monroe County is saving nearly \$400,000. Another in Marion County will save about \$500,000.

If you receive a letter from MoDOT, see a notice in the newspaper or hear a message on the radio about closing a road, share your comments. This input helps the department make crucial decisions on work hours, duration, lane closings, detours and other factors.

Marisa Brown is the public information and outreach manager for MoDOT's Northeast District.

MAKING THE KANSAS CITY PUBLIC PART OF THE SOLUTION

By Steve Porter

Two projects in the Missouri Department of Transportation's Kansas City district – a major urban interchange and a town's tree-lined avenue – posed daunting public-involvement challenges.

The aging Triangle interchange, where Route 71, Interstate 435 and Interstate 470 converge in south Kansas City, had become a congested bottleneck by the late



1990s. Early redesign proposals were given the cold shoulder by local officials and the public. Skeptics were saying MoDOT wouldn't listen to the public. Many doubted the department's engineers could design and build a safe, practical interchange. Public meetings about the project took on hostile tones.

The district engineer and public-involvement team changed tack. They began their new course by conducting a telephone survey of commuters and nearby residents to focus on the community's most critical issues with the project.

And they established a Triangle Advisory Group composed of a few allies, many harsh critics and the district's key participants in the project. Over several meetings, the advisory group began a dialogue: MoDOT explained its challenges and asked the community members for their insights. With the assistance of engineering and public-involvement consultants, MoDOT

took the group's input to engineers who produced a far better design, a combination of MoDOT's ideas and the community's expressed needs.

MoDOT introduced the new design with the theme, "Untangling the Triangle" and a consistent message that the reconstructed interchange would be "safer, smoother, smarter." The simpler design improved access, added an intelligent transportation system – a system of monitors and cameras that help control traffic flow – and eliminated earlier design elements soundly rejected by the public. MoDOT officials assured the community it would remain involved throughout the design and construction process.

Through a four-month public awareness campaign that included more than 60 presentations to groups ranging from several hundred to one at a time, MoDOT reached thousands of people eager to see the latest proposal. Newsletters explaining the new concept were mailed to 1,400 people, and 45,000 were inserted in the

"It turns out that MoDOT planners did listen and did react, in a positive way."

Kansas City Star editorial

Kansas City Star: MoDOT launched the www.kctriangle.org web site, which registered 72,000 hits in its first month. Questions sent by e-mail to the web site were often answered within minutes.



Over the course of six weeks, MoDOT launched an intense promotion of a location and design public hearing in September 1999. Movie theater slides, billboards, humorous radio spots and media advisories spurred interest in the public hearing. A computer-driven, interactive kiosk was placed at malls, grocery stores and retail outlets.

More than 500 attended the public hearing. Former critics became some of MoDOT's strongest allies. Media coverage was strongly favorable: "It turns out that MoDOT planners did listen and did react, in a positive way," said a *Star* editorial.

Active public participation led to overwhelming and continued support of the Triangle project. A follow-up phone survey a year after the final design was chosen showed more than 95 percent of the public supported the plan. Respondents said they were aware of efforts to minimize disruption, accelerate construction and provide alternative routes. MoDOT continues roundtable meetings with civic groups, businesses and employers, and with the Triangle Advisory Group. And its

public involvement efforts earned MoDOT the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials' Excel Award and three regional public-relations awards.

Most importantly, the successful Triangle effort served as a road map for listening to the community when another project – on Route 58 in Belton – turned controversial.

Belton turned out in force for a public hearing in December 2000. More than 200 Belton residents raised questions and concerns about a preliminary design to widen Route 58 through the western portion of the city. Many residents urged the department to scale back its proposed five-lane project to three lanes through an established residential neighborhood.

Within a week following the public meeting, MoDOT had met with more than 100 members of the community. District staff promised to review the design, re-examine traffic counts and accident statistics and consider alternatives that would require less additional right of way.

At first it seemed that both the residents and MoDOT officials were going in circles. Residents feared a wider state highway would encourage speeders, heavy trucks and commercial traffic through a residential neighborhood that serves children walking and riding buses to nearby schools. MoDOT officials struggled to find a design that could accommodate all highway traffic at volumes projected for the next 20 years.

Aided by a consultant, MoDOT found a solution that didn't leave both sides feeling they were boxed into a corner.

The new design relies on roundabouts – a solution that will allow three lanes of traffic to accommodate more capacity while improving safety at busy intersections. Trucks, buses and fire equipment can maneuver through roundabouts, but the slow speeds required in the intersection discourage commercial truck traffic. In addition to being safer for pedestrians, a roundabout's design allows a three-lane highway to move a greater volume of traffic more quickly than other intersections.

The roundabouts – and MoDOT – received a round of applause from concerned Belton residents during a July 2001 meeting, and the design received strong community support at another public meeting in September 2001. Belton residents liked the design features that addressed their concerns.

District staff has met several more times with an ad hoc group of adjacent property owners to keep them updated, address specific issues and squelch rumors regarding the project. Construction on the roundabouts – including a fourth roundabout added to the design at the community's request – is scheduled to begin this fall.

Steve Porter is an outreach specialist in MoDOT's Kansas City Area District.

In The Mode The Transportation Quiz

By Melissa Black



Missouri Bridges

Missouri has more major bridges than any other state. They cross rivers, creeks, gullies and roadways helping you get safely from point A to point B. You might even drive over or under one of these structures on a regular basis without even thinking about it.

Test your knowledge of Missouri bridges.

1. How many bridges does Missouri have?

- a. 100
- b. 1,600
- c. 3,000
- d. 23,700

2. How many major river bridges does Missouri have?

- a. 10
- b. 22
- c. 55
- d. 123

3. How often are Missouri's major river bridges inspected?

- a. Every year
- b. Every other year
- c. Every 5 years
- d. Every 10 years

4. What is the average age of Missouri bridges?

- a. 10 years
- b. 25 years
- c. 45 years
- d. 100 years

5. How long is the longest bridge in Missouri?

- a. 3,250 feet
- b. 5,120 feet
- c. 6,824 feet
- d. 7,847 feet

6. What is the age of the oldest bridge in Missouri?

- a. 129 years
- b. 93 years
- c. 87 years
- d. 65 years

7. How wide is the narrowest bridge in Missouri?

- a. 9 feet
- b. 35 feet
- c. 56 feet
- d. 87 feet

8. How much does it cost to build a typical major river bridge?

- a. \$6 million
- b. \$13 million
- c. \$7 million
- d. \$100 million

9. How much does it cost to build a minor bridge?

- a. \$50,000
- b. \$1 million
- c. \$500,000
- d. \$750,000

10. How much does MoDOT invest in bridges annually?

- a. \$5 million
- b. \$125 million
- c. \$200 million
- d. \$225 million

Answers: 1 – d; 2 – c; 3 – b; 4 – c; 5 – d; 6 – a; 7 – a; 8 – c; 9 – b; 10 – d.

Melissa Black is operations outreach coordinator at MoDOT General Headquarters.

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE PERSONALLY IN SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

By Bob Edwards

A handshake and a look-you-in-the-eyes conversation. One-on-one conversation has become one of the key tools used to inform the public when a major highway or bridge project is about to begin in the Springfield district.

A personal visit to the businesses and homes in an area about to be impacted by a road project gives customers a face to relate to and a contact in case more information is needed or something goes awry.

Exchanging e-mail addresses and phone numbers – and then using them to continue the information flow – creates the two-way nature of the relationship between MoDOT and customers in a specific locale.

This workboot-on-doorsill approach has been used in a variety of projects over the past three years in southwest Missouri. It has been added to the communication toolbox ranging from public meetings and focus groups and news releases to changeable message boards. Projects affected by this new approach include:

- Route 65 and Sunshine Street interchange reconstruction in Springfield
- Resurfacing along the Route 76 country music/restaurant strip in Branson
- Resurfacing along Jefferson Avenue (Route 5) in Lebanon
- Route 14/Business 65 bridge rehabilitation in Ozark
- Ozark/Howell County Route CC chip-seal between Dora and West Plains
- Route 13 widening and interchange construction in Bolivar
- Intersection widening at Glenstone Avenue and Chestnut Expressway (Business Loop 44/Business 65) in Springfield

A visit to a business, for example, involves meeting the owner or manager, handing over a “safety orange” flier and an easy-to-

read summary of the project’s basics, and taking the time to answer any initial questions.

It is more difficult to meet customers in residential areas, especially during the day when people are at work, although fliers are left on doors. But the effort is made, particularly in the late afternoon. Wherever possible, contacts are established with neighborhood associations and apartment managers to help spread the word.



Radio shows are only one communication tool MoDOT uses to get the message out. Above, a live radio program broadcast from Moberly.

Back in the district office, the communication system is organized. Those who want information by e-mail are grouped. Those who rely on faxes are combined in a list.

Whenever news releases and other updates are produced during the course of the project and are e-mailed and faxed to the news media and emergency services agencies (911 centers, county sheriffs, city police, fire, ambulance), the same pieces go to the customers in the project area.

When the information flow begins as promised in the personal visit – highlighting work progress and flagging possible traffic tie ups – customers feel comfortable enough to send e-mails or call with questions. Each

gets a quick response, whether from Customer Service or the project manager, resident engineer or construction inspector.

MoDOT’s two-way communication with the public also can be routinely heard on the airwaves of southwest Missouri.

For four years, MoDOT staff have been featured guests on a weekly call-in radio program on AM 560 Talk Radio, KWTO. The hour-long show airs on Wednesdays between 9:30 and 10:30 a.m. During the show, MoDOT staff take phone calls from the public allowing them to ask questions on a variety of transportation topics.

In one-on-one discussions with callers, the MoDOT hosts answer questions dealing with highway projects or department policy, often clearing up misinformation, rumors or speculation.

At least one caller each show describes a problem at an intersection or on a stretch of pavement or other condition on a state highway that MoDOT staffers are not aware of. After the show, crews quickly are alerted and, if possible, the problem is fixed that very day.

Local radio shows are a tool used by MoDOT staff all across the state to get the department’s message out and answer questions from residents.

Overall, people seem willing to tolerate some measure of inconvenience to get the road improvement if they know in advance what to expect. If people do still have a complaint or concern, they know whom to call. They find that they will be heard and responded to in a timely, professional and personal manner. ■

Bob Edwards is the public information and outreach manager for MoDOT’s Springfield Area District.

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